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Style without Boundaries - New Fashion Narratives using iphoneography

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Abstract

Style Without Boundaries - New Fashion narratives using iPhonography

There are current notions of who street style relates to both as subject and audience. Blogs and trend sites document various street-style trends of young people who curate themselves in offbeat ways. Major companies view these sites in the hope of picking up the next youth trend that can be analysed and then adopted commercially for a larger consumer audience. However, this current formula often depicts a narrow type of subject: young, Caucasian, and, in the main, female subjects to explore for trend analysis and observation. This research challenges these notions by using 'iPhonography' to reveal a wider spectrum of street style that does not limit itself to this current practice. This presentation reveals the use of 'iPhonography' as a vehicle to explore street style within a framework of the brief 'Style without Boundaries'. The premise of which is to capture images of stylish individuals from around the world as inclusive practice regardless of age, gender and culture.

The images captured as part of the Style with Boundaries project illuminate a more candid understanding of how people clothe themselves and construct identity in living scenarios. The project culminated with an event that highlighted how these new virtual communities are realising actual communities through 'InstaMeet' and commenting, exchanging and reflecting on narratives surrounding their own and other's imagery.

The social dialogue explored through this work places street style in relation to fashion narrative, people, meanings and the 'iPhonographers' oeuvre.

<http://blog.eyeem.com/?p=5447>

<http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/scd/whatson/news/listen/swb>

Keywords: Street Style, Fashion narratives, apps, iPhonography, Inclusive

1. Background

This project was a collaboration between Northumbria University and photo-sharing app, Eye Em. Eye Em is an emerging iPhone application championing the use of iPhonography. In 2010, its founder Florian Meissner was working in New York for a photography magazine when his DSLR camera was stolen on the subway. He turned to his iPhone instead and discovered an emerging scene of iPhonographers on the internet. He joined forces with fellow enthusiasts Gen Sadakane, Lorenz Aschoff and Ramzi Rizk and the Eye Em Beta App was subsequently launched as a mobile phone platform.

Based in Berlin, the Eye Em mobile photography platform allows users to upload their photos and share them with the world. In June 2010, Eye Em launched their first guerrilla exhibition with over 3000 images from their subway photo competition. The exhibition widened the public's awareness of the movement and created interest in expanding their user base. Eye Em's next competition on the theme of #light was part of the first Mobile Art conference held at the OpenHouse gallery in NYC in September 2010. Eye Em spoke about the Mobile Photography Movement as a growing part of the global digital art scene.

2. The Context

The project Style without Boundaries arose as a question to examine how street-style portrayal was used across photosharing social network sites (SNS) specifically Eye Em, Instagram and fashion blogs. The vehicle for this study into street-style was through iPhoneography and its users: to examine the relationship iPhoneographers had with street-style image capture, their subjects, and with the consumers of their images – their viewers. The research aimed to use the images captured by Eye Em iPhers and examine the differences in image construction and subject portrayal across gender, age and cultures in relationship to Fashion bloggers.

Blog use of Street-Style Images

Trend forecasting agencies such as Style Sight and Worth Global Style Network use street-style imagery as visual information to aid analysis of new and offbeat ways in which young people curate themselves. They use this analysis to advise clients about emerging trends. Their clients, fashion companies, reflect this visual decoding of information in a new product to sell to a wider commercial retail audience. The accepted format for image capture for this arena has been to request selected individuals to stop-and-pose for the camera. For decades it has been young stylish individuals who have been requested to pose for image capture and give information on dress codes as they have traditionally been seen as innovators and early adopters in the fashion trend cycle. As such they are deemed an important barometer of changing mood and trend cycle in society. Everett (1995) classifies the passing of innovation in any system from one member to another or group as diffusion. In other words we can see this as a meme, an idea, behaviour or style spreading from person to person within a culture that is then copied, imitated or transmuted. This idea of a meme spreading through culture has increased in proportion with the use of SNS. Trend agencies, blog sites and other arenas where innovation in social media is taking place are part of this perpetuation of different site and audience-specific memes. For trend agencies and major fashion product companies, this observance of, and construction of, memes via web diffusion is important in cataloguing street-style images for analysis and imitation.

It is understandable that when youth have historically been seen as early adopters in fashion style that they may be deemed as an important factor to watch and study for emerging trends. Studies show we are entering an era when we face a change in demographics around the world and increasingly in the west. Furthermore our aging population have lived and experienced very dynamic past eras in fashion and individuality.

“As the UK is getting older, the over-55s are becoming an increasingly powerful demographic. ... Many over-55s are hungry for more stylish fashion options for their age group. It is no longer commercially acceptable to ignore this growing customer base ...”
oxygen.mintel.com – Emma Clifford

This sector of the population are younger in disposition than previous generations, are expected to live longer, are fitter and healthier and have greater disposable incomes than their equivalent from previous decades.

3. Mobile Digital Platforms

The use of applications or ‘apps’ has increased across mobile digital platforms. The use of mobile photography by iPhers (iPhoneographers) on SNS has also increased as mobile phone technologies

have become cheaper and more accessible. This increase across user communities has resulted in a huge growth in photo sharing and new dialogues have emerged between individuals and communities from the images produced. This arena is in a constant state of growth and flux. The information and dialogue derived from this research can only claim to have a snapshot historical viewpoint of social practice in iPhoneography and street style for the time the project was initiated from 31st July 2011 to 25th September 2011.

Social media and the web have increased the ability of the millennial generation to auteur their own blogs and have influence in the production and/or replication of street-style images whether that is through the taking of their own photos or the re-blogging of others' material. How they represent their subject and the relationship of the viewer to the posed subject will be part of the analysis on the differentiation between iPhers and bloggers.

4. The Brief

The question for the brief arose out of these observations that most street-style photography on the web is presents young, female Caucasian subjects. iPhoneography was the tool used to challenge and explore this arena for a broader perspective in street-style imaging.

The Style without Boundaries brief was set to coincide with the launch of Eye Em's alpha version of their app for Android and iPhone platforms in August 2011. Asking Eye Em users to capture street-style images was an experimental method in gathering material and engaging with this iPhoneography community. The brief was discussed with Eye Em founders who put out a call for images in a language that reflected the dialect of this particular social media platform but retained the concept to challenge the community in their understanding of street style.

5. The Process

Participants used their smart phones with the Eye Em app for Android or iPhone to shoot a picture and select 'streetfashion' as the activity tag. The images became part of a live 'vibe' where they were shared, liked, commented and voted on by the Eye Em community. Every member of the community could vote through the 'like' button ascribed to each image. The call for images took place between 15th – 29th August 2011. The ten photos that were most 'liked' by the community were exhibited as prints at the event that took place in Islington as part of the London Design Festival held during September 2011. London Design Festival was chosen as the event host to encourage as many inhabitants and visitors as possible in the city to participate alongside the global call from the Eye Em community. The event of live streamed images received over 100 self-selected and invited visitors including; Fearlessly Frank, Modus Dowal Walker, Dunhill and members from the Eye Em and Instagram community. The presence of the Instagram community was particularly relevant and will be explored below.

6. The Outcome

The live streamed event included over 750 images from over 120 respondents. Entries were submitted from all over the world including US, Germany, Australia, UK, Columbia and Ireland. The images uploaded were varied in response to the brief. Some still echoed the traditional stop-and-

pose technique of engaging with the subject before image capture but, in the main, most images were of a more candid spontaneous nature. The images evidenced a discreet use of the camera and explored not only the subject but also the context surrounding the subject forming a strong narrative and visual aesthetic.

There was a varied and inclusive response to the brief that included images of street-style across ages, gender and continents. Eye Em contacted the top ten contributors to ask for the original uncompressed images before they were uploaded on the SNS. This enabled high-quality images to be printed for the exhibition. The demographic of the contributors who were most 'liked' and available to be interviewed by email were mostly male and from the 25-40year old age group. Only three had some background in photography, others had taken to image capture through the discovery and use of the iPhone.

The conversations that took place in discussing the images at the exhibition were enlightening. Although the guests were not known to each other on a personal basis, their work as 'iPhers' preceded them. Individuals at the event initiated conversations through looking at the images displayed both digitally streamed and in print to arrive at an opinion on the work and find out personal names. When the attendees found out personal names, and most significantly 'tag' names, the dialogue shifted to image production of past and current work displayed and who 'followed' who on the Eye Em platform. The style of work and bodies of imagery on display were discussed as part of a wider iPhoneography oeuvre. The images were considered as to how each contributor engendered narrative, the time of capture, the use or non-use of filters and how each person felt about the meanings of the imagery represented. Many of the attendees were not only from the Eye Em community but were also 'Igers' (Instagrammers) – members of the Instagram community.

Instagram is another photo-sharing app that engages users through a mobile SNS. Instagram was started in 2010 by Kevin Systrom. Both Eye Em and Instagram platforms are a response to the emerging use of mobile phones as photographic platforms. They both provide SNS in a portable visual framework that enables communities to form and share narrative through imagery with photo-sharing apps. These groups have formed in tandem with the available technology, primarily the use of the iPhone and lately other Android smart phones, in order to provide a specialist photo-taking and sharing eco-system – image making that uses technology encapsulated in one product, which reduces the need to carry both a phone and a camera.

The Igers were able to arrange through the Instagram SNS 'InstaMeets' to engage in real social space in different cities to share discourse on capture, methods, processes and meanings. These InstaMeets were organised photo walks or street-style events such as pub conversations planned by individual and group participants of the SNS.

The social connection of iPhers from both Eye Em and Instagram carried the same discourse at the London Design Festival event. The conversations about the images became the important message. How people communicated, felt presence, empathy for subject and interpretive life story. What techniques were used in the capture of the subject, what time of day, the lighting available, if any filters were used and what the image and content meant to iPher and viewer participant. They also informally discussed the shared culture between producer and consumer. Some contributors discussing their work indicated that they recognised an interesting scene, took the photo and then reflected on what this image meant to them as a significant story at a later date.

The interesting phenomenon pertaining to these conversations was that at no time did attendees discuss jobs, infer social status or address lifestyle qualities. The internet, in this and similar scenarios, can therefore be seen as a levelling medium in social status. The importance of sharing time was realised through the discussion of meanings and narratives of the images in front of them.

Finding the person from ‘liked’ images from both Eye Em and Instagram social networks in reality delighted all users – to engage with fellow image producers who had similar understandings and interest of capturing people from the street. The generosity of spirit amongst users where they define themselves not through their professions or personal histories but through the images that represent them as people was evident.

The goal of the iPhers is to try and tell a story, to capture and share fleeting moments in any given neighbourhood. Sometimes the narrative is seen before the capture of the image. Sometimes it is on impulse to shoot someone of interest because something about the way they look is interesting, the mood of the subject, their demeanour; this is when the story is retrospective and meaning ascribed to the image at a later time.

The imagery produced was of high quality and, in general, carefully composed. Consideration was given to lighting, angles, colour, figure placement and even where used, post-production effects. Style rather than clothing is the way someone consciously presents their physical self to the world. iPhers aim to capture the essence of this style. What images the contributors uploaded gave a greater understanding on what street style could be. In general they took images where there was no eye contact, the subject was naturalistic and represented in whatever environment they happened to be in. The subject and image were not staged. They were not all foreground full-frontal pictures but captured a variety of body shapes in different stages of movement that lack artifice.

‘Spidey’ by Brooklyn Theory was the most liked image on the Eye Em community for its candid style, attire of subject and framing of the moment.



Brooklyn Theory

<http://www.eyeem.com/u/3273>

It could be said that the taking of images through iPhoneography as a form of rapid discourse, a narrative and a sharing of reflections on self and others becomes social comment, empathy and understanding through collective image capture.

Jesse Wright likes to capture the curious, the lonely and in ‘The Art of iPhoneography’ (Roberts, 2011) discussed his past history as an influence on how he views and captures imagery.

“I pour my emotions into my photography. It might be a cliché, but I do feel like there has to be a certain amount of pain and frustration to inspire me to make images....”



Jesse Wright

<http://www.eyeem.com/u/748>

Wright continues: *'I have found that one significant advantage of shooting with a mobile phone is its stealth. ... The ubiquity and unobtrusiveness of the mobile phone allows one to capture unguarded moments.'* (Roberts, 2011)

7. iPhers and Bloggers

The two frameworks and observations on how each street-style image is captured and reflected back through the web are very different. Each image-maker has a different process when selecting a subject. It was noted that iPhers liked to 'curate' themselves on the web through the emotional meaning of their own images. Their street-style images are a comment on a greater physical photographic presence of a subject that in some way has emotional resonance for the iPher. They choose someone by chance but it has some sort of meaning to them. For iPhers, image production of street style is an observed capture of a private veridical subject in a public scenario that is iterated in digital space. The iPhers' approach may be more inclusive seeking to exchange ideas through meaning-making using candid images, observing and presenting how people represent themselves in real life.

With fashion bloggers it appears that they curate themselves through collating imagery from other people's websites or taking pictures of themselves, their friends or street subjects and uploading onto their own site and commenting on it. It becomes a conscious curation of self through selecting imagery that gives a positive reflection to their public web profile. These images of street-style could be seen to represent part of their individual persona, a reflection on who they think they are or would like to emulate. The blogger's approach is about engaging with the subject by asking them to consciously stop-and-pose in order to be photographed. In doing so the subject becomes aware of the wider framework in which their images might be broadcast and therefore are choosing what public persona they communicated in a public setting. The blogger has a remit to search out a particular type of subject that reflects his or her self and perceived blog audience. Once the typology of subject is chosen for the blog and an audience is found it would seem only natural that this would mean the blogger would go out and search for similar subjects with 'new' trends to update their blogs. In blog format, the narrative is about trend in clothing and indicators on how to wear existing styles. Image production for blogs is co-constructed with the consent of the subject. For the blogger the subject becomes an image representation of a public self in a public physical space to be re-iterated in a digital space.

8. Conclusion

This was a small project in an ever-evolving arena and catalogues rich conversations from an emerging photographic platform, Eye Em. In the call for images it was expected that the iPhers would add to street-style images in a similar framework to the fashion bloggers. The uncovering of a wider inclusive oeuvre in image capture was a surprise and part of this project's journey. It highlighted a different stream of image-makers that were contributing to photo SNS. IPHERs showed a more candid capture of subjects who were unaware of having their picture taken and possibly resulted in a more truthful reflection of the moment.

The project has also shown that the rise of single-device technology has enabled a wider participation in iPhoneography and use of photo-sharing SNS. It has removed some of the limitations and expectations imposed by a formal digital camera thereby developing a more democratic oeuvre.

The iPhers demonstrated a wide narrative and aesthetic in framing, lighting and use of filters in their image capture. At the event in London, the rich conversations around the imagery highlighted the candour and sharing amongst iPhers and introduced an element of social levelling. IPHERs, in the main, discarded professional and personal histories in favour of dialogue around the subject, image and meaning-making. This has also been highlighted by McCune (2011) in discussing the iPhers who belong to the Instagram community;

“Even as new relationships grew in person, the activity online remained the point of conversation, action and interaction.”

Facebook acquired Instagram in April 2012. Some of the original Igers are concerned about the changing nature of the platform. As with any social network in the real world, relationships evolve as people and time allow. This of course raises new questions: Will iPhers from Eye Em remain part of this photo-sharing SNS? As the groups of photo-sharing apps get ever larger will it fragment and smaller sub groups emerge?

The blogosphere is also changing and new bloggers are emerging who do consider the capture of a wider representation of style, such as Cohen's, 'Advanced Style'. The blog arena is still relatively young and in flux. As bloggers age and pass through different life stages perhaps their oeuvre and tastes in image production will also evolve. And as digital technologies and web self-publication become more user friendly older generations may feel inclined to contribute to the blog arena.

The key findings in this study are the differences of image capture between iPhers and bloggers and how they choose to frame and present their subjects online. Bloggers in co-constructing the image with the stop-and-pose subject give rise to a staged performance that presents public selves in a public physical space that is reiterated in the public blog – in each stage of image production they curate self for public consumption.

Whereas the iPhers discreet capture of subject both hides and displays their own and their subject's persona. Hiding in that the subject is 'off guard' representing their veridical private self in a public scenario that is iterated on a digital platform; displaying in that iPhers as well as the blogger gain social currency in the display of their images. Their discreet curation of subject leaves more for the viewer to interpret but does reveal elements of the iPhers' self in who and how they capture as the subject. This difference in how bloggers and iPhers capture imagery might have greater relevance in how we all choose to hide or display aspects of ourselves through imagery online.

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